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ABSTRACT

This report contains four case studies from further education colleges in England that have been addressing student retention and dropout issues during the last several years. The case studies demonstrate successful student retention strategies in diverse college contexts with different student populations. They cover the following colleges: Knowsley Community College, Long Road Sixth Form College, Walsall College of Arts and Technology, and Isle of Wight College. The report also reviews some research on the relationship between tutorial processes and student completion rates, as well as research into a number of strategies that have been developed, implemented, and evaluated by North American community colleges. Five conclusions are drawn: (1) although research played a significant role both in mobilizing effort and in creating strategy, data for recording the reasons for student withdrawal seem to have had little influence on action; (2) the case studies support the view that what works is unique to each college; (3) many of the usual change agent theories are working--that action is preferable to endless search for perfect information and that senior managers need to be involved in the process; (4) successful retention strategies all embody elements of college transformation; and (5) student retention issues may form a new literature of college improvement. Contains nine references. (KC)

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Student retention: case studies of strategies that work

Paul Martinez

Volume 1 Number 6

FE MATTERS

FEDA paper

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Summary

This FE Matters builds on work already published by FEDA (*Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence*, Paul Martinez, 1995).

It comprises four case studies from colleges which have been addressing retention and drop-out issues over the last couple of years. The case studies are practical and demonstrate successful strategies in diverse college contexts with different student populations.

The report also reviews some research undertaken by FEDA on the relationship between tutorial processes and student completion rates, and research into a large number of strategies which have been developed, implemented and evaluated by North American community colleges.

Five tentative generalisations are made on the basis of the comparison of the case studies.

First, research played a significant role in both mobilising energy, effort and enthusiasm and in informing the creation of strategy. On the other hand, data generated by many existing systems for recording the reasons for student withdrawal, seems to have played no or very little part as a stimulus to action.

The case studies provide, secondly, empirical support for the view that there is unlikely to be a panacea. Different colleges have different cultures, student and staff profiles, curriculum offers, etc. The precise mix of objectives, strategies and interventions is likely, therefore, to be unique to each college.

Thirdly, the case studies provide empirical support for many of the more common propositions derived from management of change theory. Ownership by and support from senior managers is important. Action in conditions of partial and incomplete information is preferable to an endless search for perfect information. All the case study strategies were driven by people who adopted what can be described as change agent roles. Their tasks were made easier when they were also members of the college Senior Management Team or had good access to it.

The successful strategies all embody, fourthly, elements of college transformation. Starting with a number of different ways of formulating issues and with a number of more or less broadly defined strategies, all of the case study colleges have ended up addressing issues of cultural change, staff and student expectations and some basic assumptions about college mission and purpose.

And fifthly, student retention issues may well form the cornerstone of a new literature of college improvement. In the words of the manager of one of the college retention projects:

'Every aspect of college life can be enhanced by trying to improve retention.'

1. Introduction

In common with most other developed nations, Britain has placed particular emphasis on the need to develop a skilled, well-educated and flexible workforce. There is, moreover, an apparent consensus among political parties, employers and trade unions that we are falling behind our major economic competitors in this area. The establishment of National Training and Education Targets and their recent upwards revision, represent both an aspiration towards improvement and an expression of concern at current levels of learning.

Between them, schools and colleges can demonstrate considerable success in increasing the participation rates of 16 and 17 year olds in full-time education. The national average figure is currently 71.5% for 16 year olds in full-time education. Over the last five years, however, attention has been increasingly drawn to what happens to young people once they have enrolled on their courses. In particular, issues around student retention and drop-out have risen to the top of the agenda in colleges in the FE sector. This has largely been for three reasons:

- there is a growing emphasis on successful student outcomes as part of the national economic regeneration strategy
- there is a renewed emphasis on student achievement and student learning in education and in those agencies charged with the maintenance and improvement of standards of teaching
- there is a belief that the high levels of student failure represent a significant waste of human resources and public monies

There has also been a substantial amount of energy devoted to researching the reasons for non-completion. Changes in our understanding of the issues and a number of major research projects are discussed in *Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence* (Paul Martinez, FEDA, 1995).

Discussions with many colleagues from all over the UK over the last year reinforce the conclusions drawn in that report:

- retention and drop-out issues are complex and multi-faceted
- the issues will vary from college to college and are specific to local contexts
- a variety of colleges are developing strategies which are quite successful in helping students to complete their programmes of study
- relatively little has been written up or shared concerning such strategies
- there is unlikely to be 'one best way' to address retention issues
- we are at a very early stage in the process of evaluating retention initiatives against outcomes

The aims of this issue of FE Matters are to:

- present case studies of successful retention strategies drawn from four different British colleges
- review available empirical research from Britain and North America
- draw some conclusions concerning strategy making and implementation
- suggest some possible lines of research and invite colleagues to network and share the efforts of individual colleges for the benefit of all

2. A note on the case studies

The strategies which are reviewed here were developed by groups of managers and staff as part of their college's commitment to promoting student achievement. None of the strategies involved a substantial allocation of new resources. All of them have been implemented by existing college staff. Above all, these strategies have been developed from an intensely practical and pragmatic point of view. They are driven by the determination to make a difference to student outcomes.

They are not inspired by a research or academic interest. This is not to say that they lack rigour, intellectual power, reflection or a continuous and sustained exchange between theory and practice. Their primary purpose is, however, practical rather than academic.

For ease of comparison and discussion, each account has the same structure:

- community and college context
- college formulation of retention issues
- development of strategy
- implementation of strategy
- outcomes

3. Knowsley Community College

Community and college context

The college is situated in one of five Merseyside boroughs, in the outer ring of Liverpool. The industrial base of the area has been in decline for many years and Knowsley is one of the most deprived boroughs in a depressed region. The whole of Merseyside satisfies European Union poverty criteria as an Objective 1 region. Unemployment rates are substantially higher (20%) than the UK average (7.7%, May 1996). Education is generally held in low esteem and the area suffers from two common problems in many inner cities: low aspiration and low achievement. The participation rate among 16 year olds in full-time education is around 43% and less than 20% of school leavers achieve five or more GCSE passes at A-C grade (against a national average of 51%).

The college has some 14,000 student enrolments and some 8,000 full time equivalent students. It offers a broad range of courses including GCSEs, A levels, pre-degree and linked degree courses, vocational and non-vocational courses.

Annual college income is around £13 million from all sources and the average level of FEFC funding per unit in 1995-6 was £14.68. Of the 450 colleges in the FE sector in England, there are only ten colleges with lower average levels of funding.

The curriculum is organised in ten schools. The curriculum is managed through a matrix where nine Heads of School (reporting to the Head of Personnel) are responsible for budgets and staffing, and 12 Curriculum Managers (reporting to three Assistant Principals) are responsible for curriculum design, development and delivery. Review, evaluation, operational planning and curriculum improvement processes are managed by 18 quality teams. The college operates on two main and two minor sites which are dispersed across the borough.

The college is committed to an open access admissions policy which provides a good fit between its institutional mission and the community it serves.

Formulation of issues

In 1992, almost a quarter of all students were not completing their programmes of study. It was estimated that the college would lose over £1 million FEFC recurrent funding because of student drop-out.

The college commissioned a survey of withdrawn students which identified opportunities for action and recommended:

- awareness-raising sessions for staff around course-related reasons for student withdrawal
- more systematic exit interviewing
- monitoring and improvement to admissions procedures
- increasing the effort devoted to student tracking
- further detailed research

The college was particularly motivated by the findings made by researchers that over 50% of students who completed their courses had seriously considered leaving.

The survey also noted a degree of mismatch between student and staff perceptions of the issues, with staff believing that most of the reasons for non-completion were outside the control of the college and students identifying college-related issues as significant in the decision to give up a programme of study.

Development of strategy

The strategy developed at the college had three major strands. First and foremost, the issue was given a high priority. At a meeting of all college staff, the Principal stated that:

> *'Retention is the single most important issue for our college this year.'*

A further indication of the importance attached to the issue was the creation of a retention sub-committee of the college governing body.

Second, in April 1994 a project was established with two members of staff (main grade lecturers seconded full time to the project). The objectives of the project were to:

- ensure that students make the most of the education and training opportunities provided by the college
- restrict the loss of funds due to student withdrawal, so enabling the college to continue to offer a diverse range of courses

The general principles adopted by the project were to:

- emphasise that retention was an issue for the whole college
- reinforce the message that every member of staff could contribute
- focus on action rather than information gathering
- concentrate on accentuating the positive (student retention) rather than eliminating the negative (early withdrawal)
- promote simultaneous and multiple actions on many fronts

Third, specific retention targets were agreed. The college's development plan set a strategic objective to '...improve student retention to at least 80%'.

Associated with this objective, an action plan and action targets were developed and are set out in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: ACTION PLAN FOR KNOWSLEY COLLEGE 1994-5

	Evaluation and information gathering	College culture	Staff motivation
Short term	• Define responsibilities of course administrators and lecturers • Absence enquiry review • 'At risk' criteria identified • Registration review • Liaison and conferences	• Good practice guidelines • One-to-one skills training • Establish exit counselling procedure	• Visit key staff • Presentation to staff meeting
Medium term	• Survey work • Establish and integrated tracking and information system • Employment of project assistant/outreach worker • Census procedures	• Implementation and monitoring of good practice • Student Union and college social life improvement	• Rota of visits to quality teams • Action research by lecturers • Incentives
Long term	• Total tracking system in place staff and students' attitudes	• Cultural change involving programme to attendance	• Course reviews and adjustments

Action targets	
Short term	• Collection of reliable data re current situation
Medium term	• All courses to improve retention • No course above 30% drop-out by January
Long term	• Average of 15% improvement per year • Consistently better than the national average retention rates for colleges.

Implementation of strategy

Action research and retention action teams

In accordance with the general strategy of 'pushing as many buttons as possible at the same time', large numbers of staff were soon involved in retention action teams (RATs). All full-time lecturers were asked to consider the retention issue in relation to their particular curriculum area and to identify and develop a task or project to improve the situation. They were encouraged to work in teams of two or three. Some part-time lecturers and assistant principals were also involved. The project team contributed suggestions and advice but did not otherwise seek to constrain or regulate the activity. Almost 60 projects were developed. A random selection of some of the projects illustrates their richness and diversity:

- student perception surveys carried out by students as part of their course
- the introduction of a new syllabus and monitoring the effect on retention
- synchronising enhanced curriculum activities with times of high withdrawal
- introduction of a termly student forum
- former students as successful role models
- student social events
- integration of careers input into the curriculum
- introduction of a student newsletter
- identification of students most at risk of early withdrawal

The RATs have been particularly successful in that they generated and implemented a large number of ideas to improve retention, reinforced teamwork and maintained a high profile for retention issues.

Awareness raising and information

For a variety of reasons, some staff had become sceptical of MIS data on the grounds that it could be inaccurate, out of date or presented in an unhelpful format. Rather than trying to achieve perfect information, the college concentrated on ensuring that:

- an effective paper-based system of identifying poor attendance was put in place
- available MIS information was accurate
- teaching staff had access through the 18 quality teams to their own current retention data, together with their own historic data and college average data for comparative purposes
- the retention project managers met with all the quality teams at least twice to discuss emerging retention patterns and identify action points
- further information was collected by two special surveys of particularly vulnerable students and by including new questions on the SPOC survey asking students about the reasons other students had withdrawn, tutorial support, and the operation of absence monitoring and follow-up procedures

Other strands of the information and awareness-raising strategy included:

- the provision of staff development for lecturers involved in teaching students with behavioural problems
- the inclusion of good retention practice guidelines within the induction process for new staff
- display of 'Improving Retention' guidelines on posters around the college (see Figure 2)
- inclusion of the 'Improving Retention' guidelines in the staff handbook

The college has also launched a research project to try to identify patterns of student behaviour, indications of difficulties with the academic or social side of college, and any associated demographic characteristics. Early in the academic year, personal tutors complete a very simple 'student support rating sheet' for their tutor group. They give their students a score against a number of categories: motivation, social support, time pressures, financial issues, satisfaction of entry requirements. The forms act as a prompt for tutorial discussion and are

returned in confidence to the retention project. At the end of the year, the project manager will compare student outcomes with the tutor scores in order to draw conclusions about the possible early identification of vulnerable students. A copy of the guidance sheet attached to the form is reproduced at the end of this chapter.

Above all, the project managers continue to broadcast two simple messages as loudly as possible: college staff could make a difference in assisting students to complete their programmes; every early student withdrawal costs the college £600.

Student tracking and follow-up

The college devoted considerable attention to developing monitoring and follow-up procedures and ensuring that systems which were already in place operated more effectively across the college.

College managers therefore placed considerable emphasis on checking that registers were being completed accurately and promptly. It was made clear that continuing failure to comply with this college requirement would result in a formal warning. Within a few months, virtually all registers (around 97%) were up to date. Follow-up procedures were tightened and speeded up. Students were contacted by

Figure 2: Posters displayed in staffrooms and offices around the college

Improving your retention

Some guidelines

'The personal involvement of course tutors with their individual students is the key to good attendance.'

1. Collect each student's telephone number (or address where they can be quickly contacted), at the earliest opportunity.
2. Encourage good attendance by taking opportunities to emphasise the rewards of further education and the benefits of studying your course.
3. Draw upon your past experience to make an early identification of students who are most vulnerable to the pressures to withdraw from college.

   For example: single parents, working mothers, relatively less able students, untypical members of the group. immature students, late enrollers, those with travel difficulties and those with financial difficulties are all high risk categories.

   Give them extra attention.
4. Aim to spend five extra minutes each day helping one of your 'high risk' students.
5. Ensure that as far as possible the first term's work contains the most stimulating and rewarding learning experiences.
6. Always give clear signals to the group that any absentees are a source of major concern.
7. Contact any student who is absent without given reason **within one week**, or pass the information to your course administrator so that they can make contact within one week.
8. Keep a record of reasons for non-attendance/withdrawals, so that patterns and trends can be identified and addressed.
9. Do not allow late arrivals or early leavers for a lecture to go unchallenged.
10. Be sensitive and supportive when students are experiencing timetable changes.
11. Frequently invite students to come and see you about any difficulties they may be facing in the course.
12. Always welcome back students who have been absent and ease their return to normal study.

P Lalgee, P Molloy, 480 2664

telephone (by the lecturer) or by standard letter (by an administrator) within two days of missing a class.

The college was aware that by tightening up these procedures, some students might get multiple letters. Course administrators were therefore asked to act as contact points to inform lecturers where messages had been received from students. More proactively, the college sought to make a virtue of necessity. Students were encouraged to contact the college in the case of absence:

> *'Tell us if you cannot get into college or else you may get three or more phone calls from us!'*

The only classes to be excluded from this procedure were those which took place in the evening.

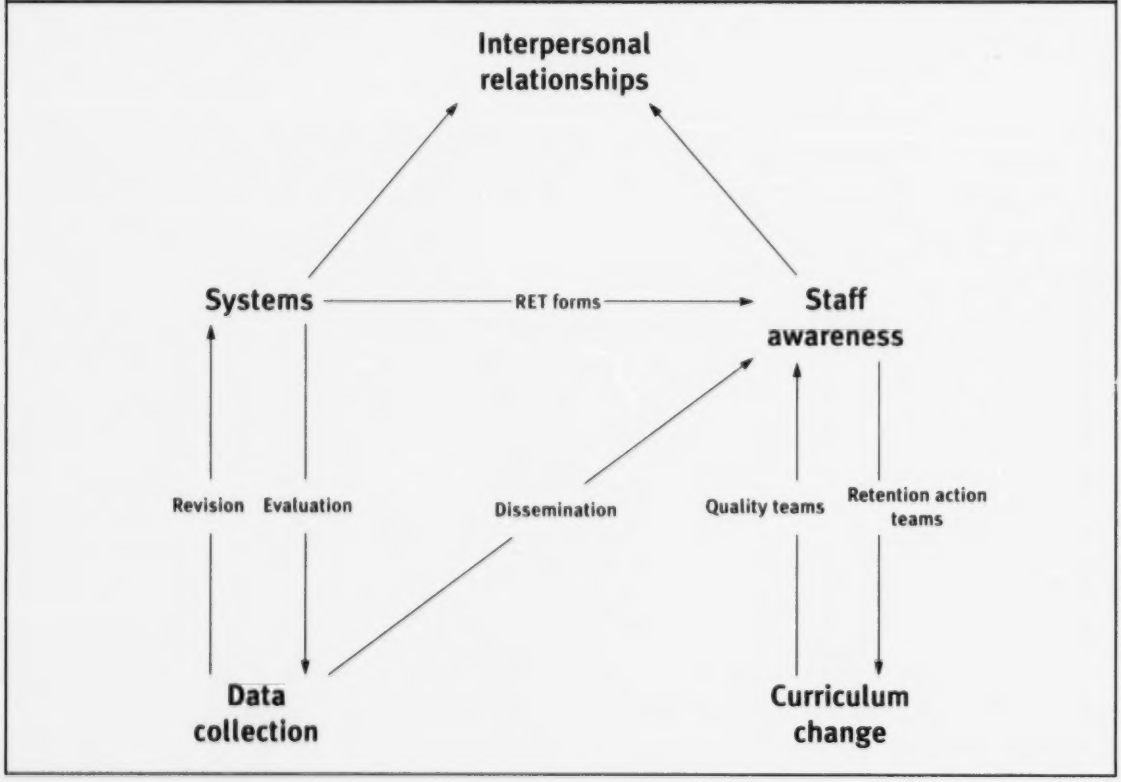
The administrators were given the key role in ensuring that the new system worked effectively within each school. A new question was also included in the Student Perceptions of College (SPOC) survey process. Students were asked to indicate whether they received a letter in the event of an absence: 'always, sometimes, rarely or never', and their responses were fed back to the Head of School.

Emphasising action and overcoming inertia

The project team was conscious that, like many colleges, Knowsley is a large organisation operating under conditions of stress and with a degree of inertia associated with complex systems. They therefore chose to emphasise action and a broad programme of initiatives that would be driven by and would involve almost all staff in the college. They acknowledged that some of the initiatives might fail, but felt that the risk of failure was counter-balanced by the desire and the need to achieve rapid change across the college.

In addition, therefore, to the measures outlined above:

Figure 3: Overview of the retention of the project at Knowsley



- students in most curriculum areas were re-interviewed in October to check that they had made the right choice of course
- the college abandoned the October half-term
- course teams made a point of including a variety of curriculum enrichment activities (outings, visits, etc.) normally programmed for later in the year, in the first term
- special surveys were undertaken among General Education and Access students
- a number of curriculum areas introduced new measures to help late enrollers, including individual attention from the teacher, allocation of a student mentor and the preparation of catch-up materials
- all tutors are going through a staff development exercise to enhance their tutoring skills, led by the college's counselling team

At the risk of over-simplification, the multiplicity of different initiatives and their mutual interaction, is shown in outline in Figure 3.

Outcomes

In 1994-5, the college achieved its target of 80% student retention: the percentage of students who completed their programmes rose to 82.7%. By January 1995, all the Quality teams had achieved a target of 70% retention, although some individual courses (36 out of 634) had withdrawal rates in excess of 30%.

The timing of student drop-out had, moreover, changed quite substantially. Not only were less students withdrawing from their courses, but withdrawals were occurring later. Figure 4 compares the monthly pattern of withdrawal from 1993-4 and 1994-5. Figure 5 shows the changes in percentage terms.

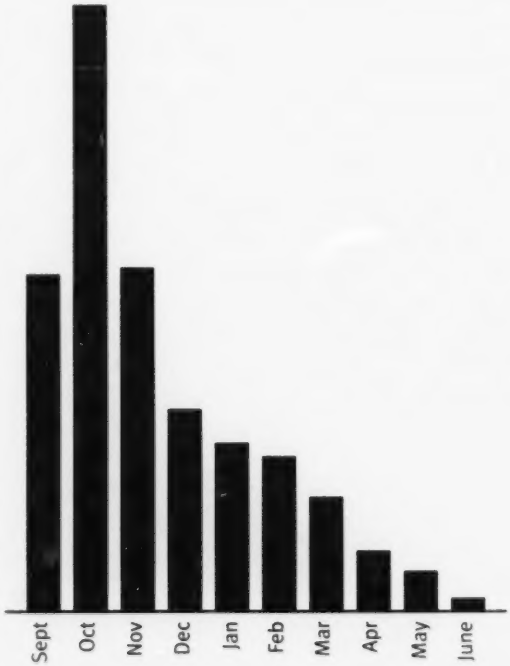
The college estimates that the increase in student completion has generated around £200,000 additional FEFC income per year.

Building on the success of the project, new targets have been set for 1995-6:

- no course to have above 30% drop-out by January

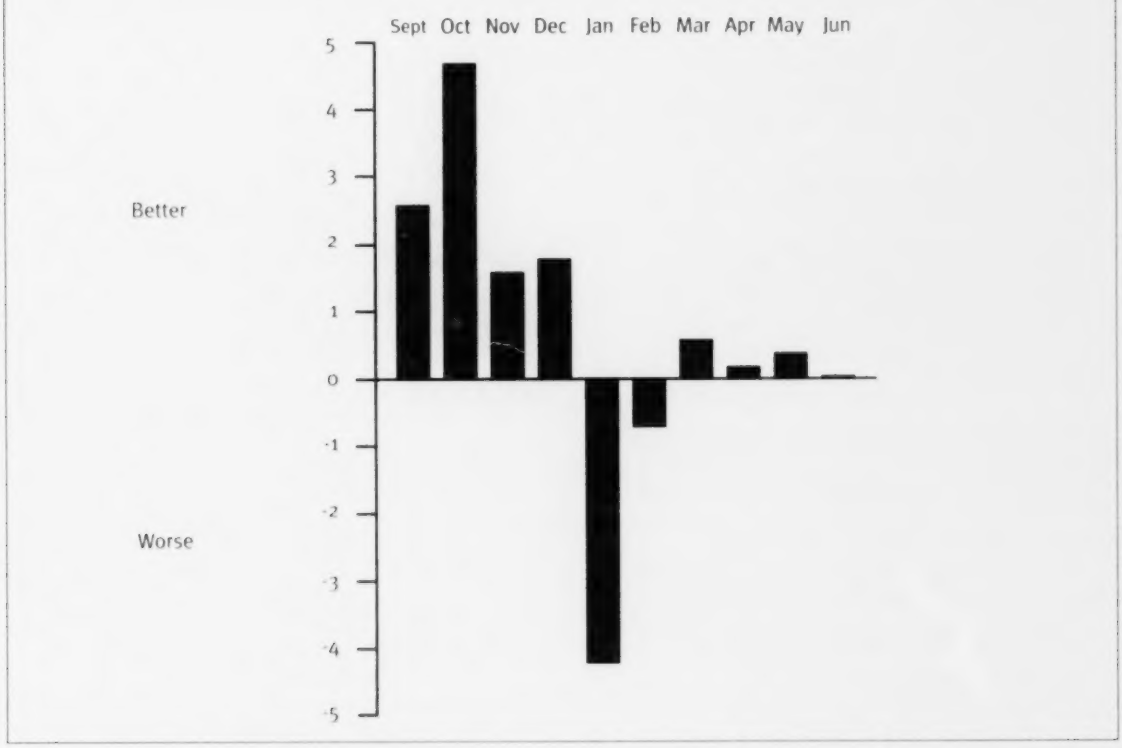
Figure 4:

Monthly patterns of withdrawal 1993-4



Monthly patterns of withdrawal 1994-5

Figure 5: Changes in retention — % of enrolment 1994-5 compared with 1993-4



- 95% of courses to improve retention rates over the previous year
- January withdrawal rates to be reduced by four per cent
- student retention across the college to improve to at least 85%

Guidance for tutors in completing the RET5 student support rating sheet

This sheet is to help you make an assessment of the risk of a student withdrawing from college on the Student Support Rating sheet (RET 5). It explains the meaning of the categories used and suggests questions that might help you to gather the necessary information. Confidentiality is important. Only the personal tutor and the members of the retention project will see the sheet which in any case should only contain the student's name and ratings.

This exercise should be seen in the same light as estimated examination grades. In this first year its purpose is to find out if in fact we can make early identification of vulnerable students by comparing our predictions with the outcome at the end of the academic year. If we can it will then be possible in the future to provide extra support for these individuals (hence the name of the sheet).

The categories

Motivation

Evidence for lack of motivation could be:

- lack of clear career/progression objectives
- no particular reason for choosing Knowsley Community College
- resitting course/transfer after failure at another institution

e.g. 'What do you see yourself doing after college?'

'Why did you come to our college rather than X?'

Social

Evidence for lack of social support could be:

- no friends on same course
- lack of support from partner/family
- different gender/age from rest of group

e.g. 'Have any of your mates from school come to college?'

'What does X think about you coming to college?'

Time pressures

People with many other demands on their time such as:

- single parents of young children
- people caring for sick relatives
- full-time students with a part-time job

e.g. 'Are you very busy, apart from with college work?'

'Will we need to make any special allowances for your punctuality?'

Financial

Is the student aware of the full financial implications of attending college?

- possible loss of income support
- possible delay of grant
- examination fees
- daily travel costs

Further information can be gained from the enrolment card/course administrator.

e.g. 'Are you aware of X? Will this present you with difficulties?'

Qualifications

Some students will have only the minimum academic qualifications/experience. Check the details on their induction card.

Any other difficulties

Students may volunteer other information that gives cause for concern:

- unhappy with some aspect of programme of study
- domestic circumstances/health
- travel difficulties
- immaturity

4. Long Road Sixth Form College

Community and college context

The college is based in Cambridge and has some 1,430 full-time 16-19 year old students, with a small but growing number of part-time adult students.

The college has changed very quickly in a short space of time. In 1992-3, the student:staff ratio was 13:1 and the programme was overwhelmingly devoted to A levels (950 A-level students; 90 GCSE students). By 1995-6, the SSR had increased to 17: student numbers had grown by some 40% and GNVQs accounted for almost 40% of full-time student enrolments. In 1995-6, there were just under 87 full-time members of staff as compared with 73 in 1992-3. Over the same period, average weekly contact time for teaching staff has increased from 20 to 23.5 hours.

The college operates in a competitive environment with 11-18 schools, a neighbouring sixth-form college and locally based FE colleges.

The college is organised around three curriculum area teams, each led by a curriculum co-ordinator. A fourth co-ordinator leads the adult curriculum. The college management team comprises the Principal, two Vice-Principals, four senior tutors and the four curriculum co-ordinators.

Formulation of issues

Three related issues were identified by the college. First, there was general concern about maintaining quality and meetings the needs of students where the SSR and consequently teaching group size had expanded quite rapidly. Secondly, from a low base, drop-out rates had also increased quite sharply from just over seven per cent of student enrolments in 1993-4 to 12% in 1995-6. Thirdly, course withdrawal rates were somewhat higher than student withdrawal rates where students reduced the size of their programmes of study (for example, by dropping a third A level or abandoning an A level being studied alongside an Advanced GNVQ). Across all subjects, the average completion rate for two-year courses was 77.4%, down from 80.9% (1992-4) and 83.5% (1991-3).

By comparison with the FE sector as a whole, student completion rates approaching 90% might not be considered a major cause for concern. The college identified early withdrawal as a priority issue, however. It prides itself on the quality of the care provided to its students, evidence of which is the inclusion of four senior tutors in the college management team. College managers were, moreover, concerned at the apparent trend in terms of increasing drop-out rates. They were apprehensive that non-completion could worsen further unless action was taken. The college's competitive environment was also a factor. Managers inferred that if steps were not taken, the college could find it progressively more difficult to recruit students.

Development of strategy

Undertaking research

The college established a 'More for Less' group under the leadership of a vice-principal. As its title suggests, the main purpose of the group was to find ways for the college to cope with delivering a broader curriculum for less reward and with fewer resources. The group determined to do this by:

- researching the issues as quickly as possible
- encouraging practitioners to generate ideas about ways forward
- ensuring that the college management team facilitated and supported the implementation of the strategy

The group immediately reviewed information available from ALIS, records of attendance, retention and completion patterns, and information on student applicants who did not subsequently enrol at the college.

The main conclusions from a survey of students who had dropped courses (but not necessarily left college) were that:

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- withdrawn students tended to have lower GCSE scores on entry
- GNVQ students were more likely than others to drop a course, usually an accompanying A-level
- there were certain 'drop-out bulges', particularly after the first half-term and following the completion of records of achievement and Year 12 examinations
- the most common reasons for dropping a course (as opposed to leaving college) were to do with attendance, work rates and perceptions of the course
- a significant number of students dropped courses because they had fallen behind with work and because giving up was easier than catching up
- some changes of course or reduction in programme were 'healthy' and done by agreement for sound educational reasons

The general research findings were supported by some detailed investigations in the History Department. Students who had dropped History A level were invited to give their reasons. The outcomes are shown in Figure 6 and tended to reinforce perceptions that the college needed to take action.

Figure 6: Reasons given by students who had given up History A level

Falling behind with work	12
Subject too hard	7
Lack of interest/dislike of teaching methods	5
Leaving college to study/take up employment elsewhere	5
Health/personal problems	4
Moved away from area	3
Couldn't cope with three A levels	2
Other reasons	3

The third strand of research came from a revised departmental review process. The start of the process was brought forward to September, partly in response to perceptions that students were getting into difficulties early in the academic year. The conclusions of the first stage of the review are quite surprising given the relatively high achievement of the student intake at GCSE.

Teachers found that the confidence of many students dipped sharply because of the jump that they felt they had to make from GCSE to A levels and Advanced GNVQs. Assumptions about the maturity of students' learning skills and degree of application were also challenged by the finding that students were doing much less private study than had been expected. Third, the evaluation picked up some dissatisfaction with teaching and learning styles, including:

- discomfort expressed by some students about making presentations to others and learning collaboratively with other students
- a preference by some students for teacher input
- some criticisms of a lack of variety
- marked variations between student attitudes towards different syllabuses for the same subject, apparently associated with similar variations in completion and success rates

Students generally expressed satisfaction with individual support from teachers and with tutorial support, but what was most surprising was the degree of divergence in some cases between teacher and student perceptions of what was going on in the classroom.

Implementation of strategy

The general strategy pursued by the group was to try a lot of different things in different areas in the belief that the effects of any single intervention would be quite limited. The main actions involved around:

- guidance, counselling, course information and induction
- changes to teaching strategies
- monitoring student attendance and progress
- improvements to facilities

To address the drop-out between initial interview and commencement of course, improved course information was provided at open days and at the interview stage. This had the additional benefit of ensuring that students were better informed about the courses they had applied for. All members of the College Management Team spent the last two weeks of the summer holiday contacting students, confirming courses and re-interviewing where appropriate.

The college lost fewer students in 1995-6 compared with the previous year between initial interview and course commencement and fewer students had changed course, dropped courses or left college by the first half term.

To address the problem of bridging the gap from GCSE to GCE A-level/Advanced GNVQ standard:

- teachers were encouraged to regard the first term as transitional, and to set exercises and activities that boosted confidence rather than set A-level standard work too early
- departmental surgeries were introduced to provide additional individualised support to students, not just in the first term but throughout the course
- all departments produced a student handbook providing details of course structure and assessment, together with advice about study skills and other information to help students with their studies; the handbooks are regularly referred to in lessons

The college has tightened up its procedures in respect of attendance. Every absence from a lesson generates a 'cause for concern' slip to the student's tutor. The tutor discusses the absence with the student and, if there is a problem and it persists, the student may be referred to the senior tutor. The system has proved less burdensome than anticipated and attendance rates have improved significantly.

Similarly, departmental systems for monitoring lateness or non-completion of work have been improved and students who are failing to submit work on time are referred to tutors and senior tutors. Two missed attendances will be picked up by the personal tutor; three will be followed up by a telephone call to the student's home by an administrator. It is too early for the college to gauge the effectiveness of these measures, but students appear to be producing work more punctually and attendance rates seem to have improved.

These monitoring systems are complemented by the college's extensive use of ALIS. Student progress is monitored against ALIS predictions based on GCSE scores, to identify, congratulate and encourage those who are doing well, and identify and help those who might be underachieving. Above all, the ALIS data, together with departmental records, is used as a means to promote student understandings of their own learning and possibilities for improvement. Following the Year 12 exams, tutors discuss student progress with reference to the results, average course marks, grades predicted by the department, GCSE scores and ALIS predicted grades. An example of the sort of information which tutors have as a basis for this discussion is appended at the end of this chapter.

The different strands of the strategy can best be exemplified by reference to change in a particular department as shown in Figure 7.

In addition to the attention the college has paid to its curriculum, it has embarked on a programme to improve facilities. This includes:

- remodelling the reception area and employing additional receptionists
- improvements to student common room facilities
- refurbishment of teaching areas
- a building programme
- better library facilities
- improvements to the cleaning of the college

Figure 7: A case study — the History Department

The department was aware that completion and success rates were higher on some syllabuses offered by the department than others. Students confirmed this in their responses to questionnaires. This led the department to drop two syllabuses in 1994 and concentrate on its two most successful ones.

Despite this, retention rates on one syllabus were poor, while on the other they were among the best in the college (46% and 77% respectively). Responses to further student questionnaires and interviews with students in small groups revealed that a clearer structure with defined objectives, against which students could measure progress, was the principal reason for higher satisfaction and retention rates on one course. This led to a review of teaching and learning methods on both courses.

New procedures for following up absence and for ensuring that students catch up on missed work and hand work in on time have been introduced and the situation is monitored fortnightly as a standing agenda item for all departmental meetings.

In the first half of 1995, drop-out rates fell dramatically to less than two per cent on both courses (two withdrawals from 130 enrolments).

Outcomes

The college has achieved demonstrable improvements in the proportion of students who move from application to enrolment, and improved attendance rates and completion rates — in History, quite spectacularly so.

Other departments are now adopting similar processes to those associated with the successful syllabus in History, by defining clearer learning objectives, levels and options for improvement.

Some of the initiatives were less successful. Departmental surgeries, for example, have met with a mixed response. There is evidence, however, that more structured approaches where teachers issue a programme indicating when particular issues will be addressed, are more successful.

Three general conclusions have been drawn by the group. The first is the need to take action, even in conditions of imperfect information. The strategy launched at Long Road is, in a sense, a whole college action research project where measures are designed on the basis of the best available information and implemented partly in order to see what happens. This, in itself, will provide further, and perhaps more valuable, information.

Complacency, secondly, has been challenged. Some staff did not realise or accept that there was a problem over retention and completion rates, seeing wastage as 'natural', 'healthy' or as a manifestation of the maintenance of 'rigorous standards'. The team needed to change perceptions so that improving student retention became a high priority.

Third, the team concluded that it was not wise to use ALIS predicted scores to target 'at risk' students. To focus exclusively or largely on 'under achieving' students would be self-defeating. It would imply that all students would only be likely to achieve their ALIS predicted grades. It would also deny the opportunity open to all students to benchmark their progress and to improve on previous achievement. By way of illustration, an example of the sort of information available to tutors and used in discussions with students is at the end of this chapter.

Long Road College: example of ALIS and college data used by a personal tutor

12 CHP ALIS and departmental predicted grades

Name and tutor group	Y12 Exam result (out of 20)	Equivalent grade	Average courswrk mark	Dept predicted grade	Average GCSE score	ALIS predicted grade
Student/Tutor						
SA	14	A	5	A	5.5	D
JS	4	N/U	3	D	5.3	D
FN	12	B	2	B	4.6	E
MP	6	E	2	D/E	4.7	E
LK	12	B	4/5	B/A	5.6	D
LF	6	E	2	D/E	4.5	E
IDJ	16	A	3/4	A	6.3	C
MC	6	E	2	C	5.7	C/D
FC	8	D	3	C	5.3	D
MW	11	C	4	B	5.6	D
JW	16	A	4	A	6.3	C
LW	8	D	2	D	4.0	N
PV	11	C	2	B/C	6.0	C
PC	3	U	3	D	5.5	D
JD	8	D	2	D	4.4	E
MAE	15	A	4	A	6.5	B/C
SEP	7	E	2	D	5.8	C/D
BH	5	N	2	D/E	5.5	D
SP	8	D	4	C	5.5	D
ES	6	E	4	C/D	5.0	D/E
NS	5	N	2	D	5.3	D
PEB	17	A	4	A	6.9	B
IP	12	B	2	C/B	4.7	E
CIR	6	E	2	D	6.0	C
EP	3	U	2	D	4.8	D/E
FB	10	C	4	C/B	5.3	D
JA	7	E	2	D	5.3	D
WB	4	N/U	3	D/E	4.1	N/E
	(out of 10)					
IDS	3	E	3	B/C	5.3	D
MGR	5	C	4/5	A	4.9	D/E

5. Walsall College of Arts and Technology

Community and college context

This is a medium-sized inner-city college with approximately 11,000 students. Most students (approximately 8,000) are part-time adult learners. Student hardship is a major issue with around 1,600 students claiming means-tested benefits. The college employs a full-time money advice worker. The student population at the college is expected to remain at roughly its present size with some possible increase in the proportion of older students.

The college is on several sites with the main site in Walsall town centre. Student Services has a high profile in the college and has been pro-active in developing guidance at all stages of the learning process.

The range of student services is wide, including personal counselling, careers advice and guidance, student finance, welfare benefits, accommodation, leisure, childcare, overseas based students. Students can drop in or make an appointment. Student Services is accessible and in the old college hall, just off the main entrance of the college.

They are open from 9am-7pm Monday-Thursday and 9am-4pm on Friday. The area is staffed by a multicultural team, which consists of counsellors and guidance workers, a careers adviser, additional learning needs manager and administrative staff specifically trained in student services work.

The average level of funding per unit in 1995-6 is £17.49.

Formulation of issues

The college has embedded a system of learning and learner support which it calls Student Focus. This is a way of bringing together academic and pastoral support within the general ambit of student services. The core of the activity is the partnership between students, tutors and counsellors. Almost all students (full- and part-time day students) have a personal tutor, who will also be their teacher. A tutorial curriculum has been developed for all students on programmes of study which last for 15 hours per week or more. The weekly hour-long tutorials provide a focus for settling in, induction and initial assessment. Subsequently, tutorials provide a framework for monitoring student progress, providing support, evaluating outcomes and improving student retention.

Tutorials are, in turn, supported by student focus teams which meet every six weeks with only one agenda item: student progress. For a given group of students, the focus team will include the team leader, tutors, one of the eight college student counsellors, and an academic clerk. The size of the focus team varies but will generally involve four tutors with tutor groups of around 20 each. The main task of the meeting will be to share information and perspectives on student progress, identify any problems, and develop solutions. These will usually be taken forward by the relevant tutor but may entail referrals to specialist counsellors or other sources of support.

In each of the college's four programme areas there is an administrative base room. All individual student records are held in the base room and updated following each six-weekly review. Tutors and focus teams are supported by a computerised tracking system which enables them to monitor student progress and attendance.

While the college was satisfied that Student Focus was working well, a number of issues were identified which called for some action. There was concern that the tutorial curriculum was skewed towards the needs of younger students and was less well suited to the needs of most adult learners. Indeed, the identity of 'adult learners' was problematic; student services found it helpful to use the following characteristics of adult learners (adapted from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education — NIACE):

- early returners (20-25), mainly day-time students, often with poor educational outcomes at school, the fastest growing group

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- late returners (25-40), mainly day-time students
- improvers (30+), looking for career development, mainly day-release or evening students
- enhancers (30-40), looking for personal growth and development

Questions were raised about the effectiveness of guidance and induction processes for many of these students. The college was experiencing quite high rates of withdrawal for adult students. It was felt that a significant factor was the assumption that students who expressed a strong preference for a particular course did not need detailed guidance. Discussions with students suggested that the college represented something of a learning labyrinth and that they were losing their way. Some adult students, moreover, did not necessarily want to 'find their way through the maze' in a single journey. From a variety of largely anecdotal evidence, Student Services concluded that many adult students needed to interrupt their patterns of study and follow courses in quite small elements. Finally, even where adult students achieved their qualification aim, many were not getting a job (their ultimate objective), raising issues about the appropriateness of the original choice of programme. This research was published in *Managing the delivery of guidance in colleges* (FEU, 1994).

Development of strategy

In the light of this diagnosis, student services took the lead in proposing some changes. The critical components of the strategy would be:

- a reliable profile of current and potential students
- an understanding of the demand structure of learning (day/evening/weekend/part-time/community based, etc.)
- the fusion of learner and learning support through curriculum redesign
- related changes at the institutional level in terms of staff expectations, allocation of teaching time, and target student numbers

The strategy would have to be flexible to allow for the variety of adult students and the variety of qualification routes they would want to follow.

Student Services staff were determined to concentrate on the two groups of adult students who seemed most at risk: 'early' and 'late' returners. To satisfy the critical components, Student Services designed a strategy involving:

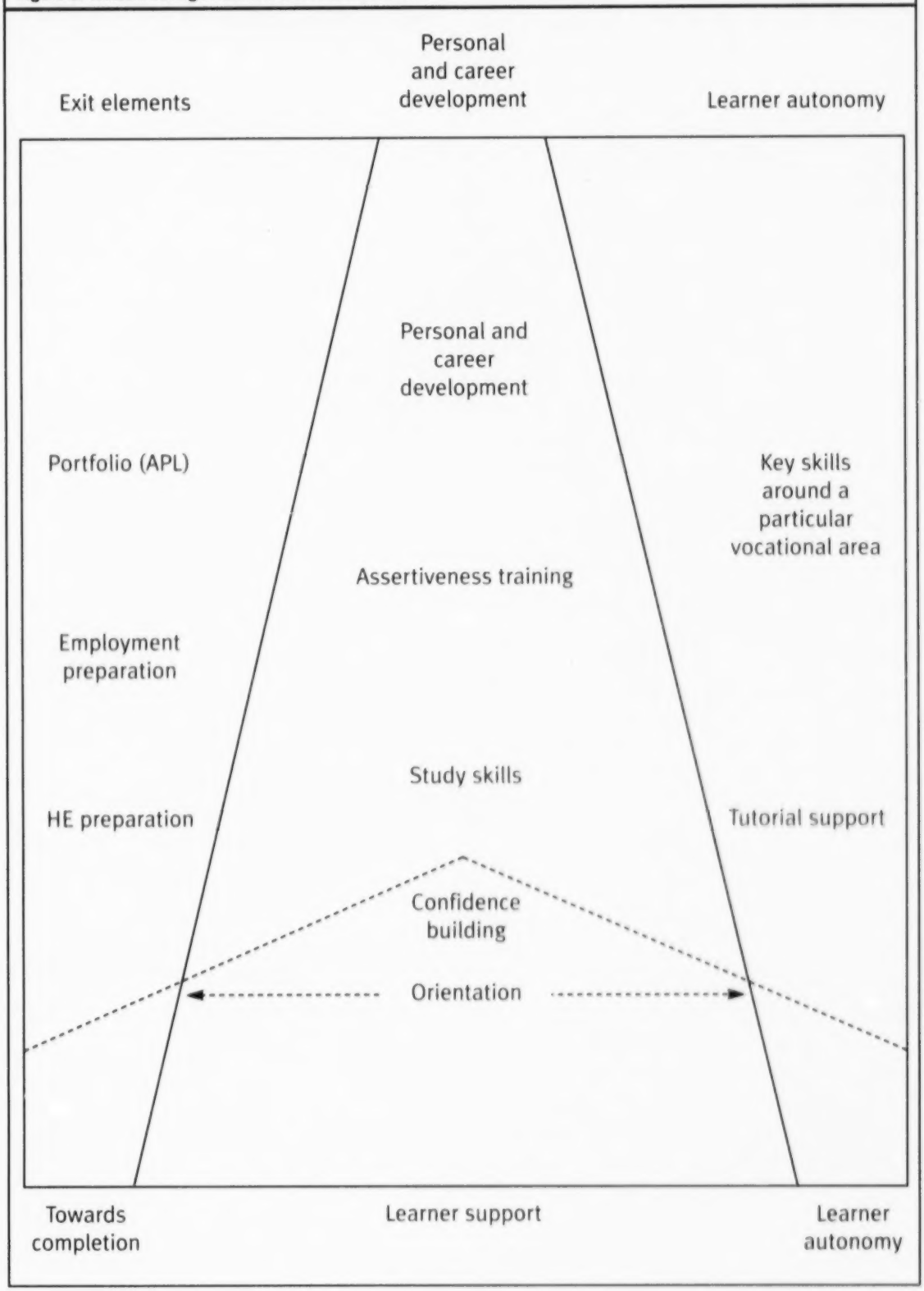
- the creation of a specialist adult guidance team
- piloting new central admissions procedures for adult students
- curriculum redesign to create a freestanding orientation and induction module
- the development of an adult learner support programme
- new completion and progression procedures for adult students

The strategy is illustrated in Figure 8. The aim of the strategy is to provide three sorts of assistance: support to learners, assistance to students in becoming more autonomous, and help to move on to other education or employment. The model brings out several features of the strategy quite clearly. The three components need to be kept in balance, though their relative importance changes over time. Learner support is important at the beginning of the process, and as the model indicates is mainly delivered through the orientation programme (see this chapter's **Implementation of strategy**). As students progress, more emphasis is given to developing and reinforcing independent learning skills and preparing for other courses or employment.

Implementation of strategy

The central admissions system was initially modified to include a guidance element for part-time adult learners on Access and some Return to Learn courses; the latter are a series of vocational courses at the equivalent level to NVQ 2, which are designed to facilitate entry or re-entry to education. This has now been extended to most part-time adult students and increasingly leads directly into an orientation programme called 'Activate'.

Figure 8: Walsall College framework for adult learners



Activate is a freestanding module which lasts 20 hours over five weeks, is scheduled at convenient times and is provided free of charge. Originally offered two to three times per term, it is now being run around 30 times a year, with around 20 students in each group. It is offered at the college's main site and at a number of outreach centres. To get the module operational as quickly as possible, to test it properly, and to identify and remedy any problems, the initial delivery team comprised teachers who were enthusiastic exponents of interactive teaching methods and active learning approaches.

The module itself involves a combination of guidance, encouragement and confidence building, a variety of taster sessions, an introduction to study skills and action planning, and the preparation of a personal portfolio. The portfolio is accredited by the local Open College Network. An example programme is set out in Figure 9.

An example of the college's publicity material for one of the modules is at the end of this chapter.

Much of the Walsall curriculum has been unitised and it is relatively easy for students to join a mainstream programme after an Activate module throughout the year. The college has, however, identified a substantial demand for computing skills courses and these are also offered to follow on from Activate modules.

Personal career development programme

This has been designed and piloted for Access and Return to Learn courses.

The main objectives of the programme are to provide a central and generic core for a variety of different courses aimed primarily at adult students. It is delivered by the student's personal tutor and includes elements on:

- assertiveness
- confidence-building
- interpersonal skills
- communication skills (for example, creating CVs, preparing for interviews, applying to HE)
- careers guidance (supported by software packages such as Adult Directions)
- learning skills
- team and group working skills

Students prepare an individual portfolio and this, together with the different programme elements, is supported by goal-setting, action planning and review. Tutors are supported by centrally produced resource materials.

Like the orientation programme, personal career development is accredited by the local OCN, the West Midlands Access Federation.

Completion procedures

These procedures are offered jointly throughout the summer by Student Services together with the Careers Service. Their main focus is to provide guidance and support to students in respect of further and higher education courses and securing employment. They can be used by students from other colleges.

Outcomes

Almost all students (around 95%) complete the orientation module and gain accreditation. The small minority who drop out usually do so on the first day, because they are very confident in their choice of a particular course. Retention rates have also increased on mainstream courses chosen by adults who have gone through the orientation programme.

Slightly different versions of the module are now being used across the college as an induction module for Access courses, as first modules for all Return to Learn courses, and as standalone preparation for employment courses.

Having been developed and tested by a group of specialist teachers, the orientation module has proved a successful vehicle for staff development and to date a dozen teachers have been involved in delivery.

Figure 9: ACTIVATE programme

	10.00 am-12.00 noon	12.45 pm-2.45 pm
Week 1 08.06.95	• Welcome • Portfolio	• Information Technology • NVQs/GNVQs • Tour of the college
Week 2 15.06.95	• Job analysis • Action planning	• Access • Guidance • Return to Learn • Technology
Week 3 22.06.95	• Personal summary	• Hair & Beauty Therapy • Maths Centre • Book-keeping/AAT • Business Admin. Centre • Services to People
Week 4 29.06.95	• Action plans • Study skills	• Decorative Applications and Sign Technology • Caring
Week 5 06.07.95	• Completion of portfolio	• Evaluation and plenary session

ACTIVATE

NO COURSE FEE!

BEECHDALE NEIGHBOURHOOD LEARNING CENTRE

at

FRANK F. HARRISON SCHOOL, LEAMORE LANE,
WALSALL, WS2 7NR

In Association with Walsall College of Arts & Technology and Walsall City Challenge

AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE FOR ADULTS

Your future starts here .....

Quality with Equality

Who should come?

This is a 5 week course (4 hours per week) for adults (men and women over 21) who are thinking of returning to education or training but are either not sure what would be the right course or training programme for them, or know what they want to do but lack confidence in their basic skills.

What could ACTIVATE mean to you?

Acknowledgement of your experience (at home or work)
Career guidance
Tasters of many job-related (vocational) training courses
Introduction to college - a place for adults
Vocational assessment - credit for your experience
An opportunity to break out of your usual routine
Try something new for YOU
Encouragement to begin a new stage in your life

What will the course do for you?

The course is designed to:-

- Help adults develop the skills and confidence they need to enable them to pursue educational and training opportunities by providing a sympathetic introduction to college and study.
- Provide guidance to help adults decide what direction they want to take, and help them identify appropriate courses or training.
- Give adults recognition for their abilities and achievements.

What can you study?

By building a portfolio of evidence you can gain a West Midlands Access Federation Credit or BTEC Core Skills Certificate.

Everyone on the Course will be encouraged to draw up their own personal development plan. The Course includes information on programmes run by the Learning Centre together with other Training/Learning opportunities in Walsall, covering such subjects as: English & English as a second language, Hairdressing, Business & Secretarial, Numeracy & Maths, Catering & Cookery, Study skills, Health, Caring, Computers & Information Technology, Science, Motor Vehicle, Fashion & Textiles, Art & Design, Electronics, and Decorative Work.

If necessary separate classes for female students can be arranged.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

When and Where?

Mondays at 10.00am - 2.45pm for five weeks. Courses begin on 25th September and 6th November 1995. Classes are timed to be as convenient as possible for parents with school-age children.

The Course is at your local Learning Centre - **Beechdale Neighbourhood Learning Centre at Frank F. Harrison School, Leamore Lane, Walsall, WS2 7NR.**

Cost?

No course fee.

Student Support?

We have a strong student support service provision to help you with financial difficulties, personal problems, careers advice, grants and benefits, choosing a course. You will also have a personal tutor.

Childcare Facilities?

You can book a place in our creche for pre-school aged children. Please let us know in advance, by contacting **Maria Forrester** on **01922 497005.**

How to apply?

No formal qualifications are required, just fill in the application form below and send to the **address overleaf**, or ring **Maria Forrester** on **01922 497005** *or* **Jane Kijewski** at College on **01922 657053** for further information.

An Introductory Course for Adults

Name:

Address:

Tel No:

Please indicate which course preferred.
25th September 1995 ☐ 6th November 1995 ☐
Please send me details of other ACTIVATE courses at Walsall College ☐

Creche places required for.....children aged.....

An Introductory Course for Adults

A course intended to develop the self confidence and study skills of adults who are thinking of returning to education to improve their employment prospects, but are not sure what would be the right course for them, or would like to improve their study skills before starting.

Equal Opportunities

Walsall College of Arts & Technology is committed to an open enrolment policy for all who are eligible for entry onto courses regardless of colour, ethnic or national origin, gender, disability or religious belief. In particular the College wishes to encourage ethnic minorities, women, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups to apply.

Disclaimer

While the Prospectus and other College publicity material offers a guide and outlines contents of our courses there may, from time to time, be changes which may alter the content or provision of programmes. In this respect, Walsall College of Arts & Technology accepts no liability for the accuracy or otherwise of statements appearing in the Prospectus or any publicity material.

Before accepting any place offered on a course, prospective students should be aware that the provision of an education service by the College is subject to written terms and conditions of contract. Such conditions include limiting the College's liability should industrial action or other circumstances prevent or interfere with the provision of services or cause the College to alter or re-arrange any of the educational service offered.

The College also reserves the right to withdraw any advertised class for which insufficient numbers of students enrol and to close any class if low numbers attending make it no longer viable.

WALSALL COLLEGE OF ARTS & TECHNOLOGY
FREEPOST St. Paul's Street, Walsall, WS1 1XN
Telephone: (01922) 657000 Fax: (01922) 657083

Quality with Equality

Designed & Produced by the Marketing Unit of Walsall College of Arts & Technology

6. Isle of Wight College

Community and college context

The college is located in Newport. Its social and economic context is rather different from the seaside idyll perceived by those of us who know the island mainly as a holiday destination. Wage rates are low and housing and accommodation can be expensive and sometimes in short supply. There is unemployment which is slightly above the national average in summer and substantially above in winter (11.7% in January 1995). Notwithstanding the holiday image, therefore, the island shows a number of signs of rural poverty, including the declining availability of public transport.

It is the only college on the island and enrols around 7,350 students of whom 2,000 are full-time.

The staying-on rate at 16 is extremely high (almost 90% in 1994) but the education environment is very competitive with five school sixth forms. The college was founded in 1951, originally specialising in construction and engineering. It now offers a broad vocational and general education curriculum. There are approximately 250 teaching staff (of whom just under half are full-time) and some 130 support staff (most of whom are full-time).

The ALF per unit in 1995-6 is £17.03.

Formulation of issues

In 1993, two social science tutors at Isle of Wight approached the then Further Education Unit (FEU), because of their concern about the number of students who were failing to complete courses, apparently because of illness or financial hardship. Their approach coincided with the publication of *Unfinished Business* (Audit Commission, 1993) and they were invited to submit a proposal for a substantial research project which could generate outcomes that would be useful to other colleges as well as their own.

The researchers initially anticipated that the main findings would be to confirm the widely-held view that non-completion was largely attributable to external factors. Their findings, however, revealed that early withdrawal from programmes was caused by a combination of organisational and cultural, as well as external, factors.

The research took place over a ten-month period and comprised two stages:

- a survey of all current students on one- or two-year full-time courses due to complete in July 1993
- in-depth interviews with all students who had withdrawn from the same courses; the withdrawn students completed the same questionnaires as the current students and also discussed their reasons for leaving

The outcomes of the research were written up in an unpublished report, which is available on request (*Factors affecting successful completion — the Isle of Wight college: a case study*, J Medway, R Penney, FEU, 1994); they have also been summarised in a companion to this issue of FE Matters (*Student retention in further and adult education*, P Martinez, 1995).

The report made 18 recommendations directed to colleges in general but based very closely on the outcomes of the research (Figure 10).

Implementation of strategy

In contrast to the other colleges discussed here, the Isle of Wight did not create a special group or task force to develop and implement a retention strategy. Nor was any overall responsibility allocated to a senior college manager. Instead, the report and recommendations were received as a source of evidence and information which could guide and inform policy making and decisions taken by individual managers. It was also used in staff development workshops and tutor training programmes. Almost all of the recommendations have now been acted on.

The report highlighted some inadequacies in the guidance and advice system. A new guidance and admissions counsellor was appointed (and is now part of Student Services).

Figure 10: Recommendations from the Isle of Wight case study

1. Students need independent advice and guidance before, during and on leaving college.
2. Colleges should develop interview systems which ensure equity and reduce indiscriminate recruitment.
3. College systems should ensure no student leaves college without the opportunity of transfer to another programme or alternative.
4. College induction should be addressed and reinforced throughout the programmes. Particular attention should be paid to late starters and to the development of study skills.
5. Programme tutorial systems should be proactive and offer individual support with subject and programme tutors, referrals for specialist help and opportunities to negotiate academic and personal tutors.
6. Colleges should ensure expectations about programmes and college being different from school are met.
7. College procedures should be in place for dealing with student grievances and an anti-discriminatory ethos should be developed.
8. College programme organisations should take account of students' commitments and responsibilities outside college.
9. College programmes should be organised to enable students who are unsure about what they want to do to sample programmes in the early weeks.
10. One year programmes should be evaluated for progression onto other programmes and destinations.
11. Work experience placements should be organised, appropriate and integrated into all programmes.
12. Colleges should have clear criteria for financial support from Access and other college funds available to students.
13. Colleges should have resources available to support the development of new programmes and for staff development to implement change.
14. Colleges should consider offering support to students where programmes require expensive equipment.
15. Colleges should consider free transport to and from college.
16. Government should make mandatory grants available for all students in FE.
17. Colleges should ensure systems are in place to track and monitor student progress and outcomes.
18. Colleges should provide resources for research facilities to provide information, analysis and evaluation of change in FE and ensure it is carried out by appropriately qualified staff.

Admissions are now guidance-led and centrally administered, instead of being controlled by tutors. Standardised interview procedures have been implemented across the college to improve equity and also reduce indiscriminate recruitment. Two careers officers are now based at the college.

A new tracking and monitoring system provides more reliable data. Tutors have been charged with the identification and recording of student withdrawals and transfers. Exit interviews, though not college policy, are encouraged and are taking place in some curriculum areas (via Student Services). The criteria for the allocation of financial assistance through the Access fund have been clarified.

Student Services has been relocated to the main college site and now has a higher profile and a more important role.

A new tutorial system is to be implemented across the college in September 1996 to address the issues highlighted both by the research report and by the 1995 FEFC Inspection Report.

New programmes now have more resources for staff development support, as do those programmes implementing substantial curriculum change. The student induction process is now unified across the college and has been given a higher priority. Enrolments

Figure 11

Academic year	Full-time student enrolments	Growth in full-time enrolments over previous year (%)	Withdrawals	Withdrawals as a percentage of enrolment
1993-4	1,105	4.2	217	19.6
1994-5	1,370	24	369	26.9
1995-6	1,880	37.2	233 (to Feb 96)	12.4

have been delayed and now take place three weeks after the commencement of the academic year. During this three-week period, students have the opportunity to sample different programmes of study.

The role of the Learning Support Unit has been expanded to include screening in the early weeks and to support the learning process. All students are entitled to receive additional learning support.

There is a new grievance and academic appeals procedure which has been implemented across the college. Equal opportunities and anti-discriminatory policy have been given a much higher status.

Research and evaluation is now considered a priority to support the implementation of organisational and cultural change. It now informs the strategic planning process and the links between staff development, curriculum development, quality assurance and research have been recognised by both management and staff.

Outcomes

The percentage of full-time students who withdrew from their courses actually rose in the year following the completion of the research programme. This can be attributed to two different causes. First, there was a dramatic growth in 1994 (and 1995) of full-time student enrolments, mainly in three new areas of provision: full-time A-level programmes, full-time courses for unemployed adults, and new GNVQs. Second, many of the changes prompted by the research were only implemented during the course of the 1994-5 academic year. Indeed, the new tutorial system will only be in place in September 1996. The details of enrolments and withdrawals are shown in Figure 11.

Evaluation of the changes and their impact on retention are currently taking place using a similar methodology to the previous research. This should enable detailed comparisons to be made between student experience, expectations and perceptions now and those identified in 1993. The research will also involve interviews with college staff about the changes and issues linked to improving student experiences, achievement and retention. Staff have been willing to participate in the research and welcome the opportunity to become involved in change. Findings from the follow-up research with students will be fed back to programme teams early in the Autumn term and a report made available to college managers.

7. Evaluation studies from Britain and North America

While improved practice in the FE sector is clearly of major interest to students, teachers, college managers and external stakeholders including Inspectors and funders, there has been very little attempt to evaluate systematically the effectiveness of different student retention strategies.

To satisfy this need, FEDA started a research project, Successful strategies to improve student retention rates, in May 1996.

In the meantime, there has been only one British evaluation study, done by the former FEU, of a particular strategy to improve participation rates: tutorial support. The project took place in 1994-5 to explore the content, processes, theory and practice of tutoring across the FE sector. Over 40% of colleges took part in an initial survey and a further nine colleges participated in development work and a more detailed study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of tutorials. The detailed research took three main forms:

(a) surveys of tutor perceptions

(b) evaluations of development projects

(c) surveys of student perceptions

Some of the qualitative data was quite persuasive. Specifically, some 200 tutors identified ways in which tutorials could help students to complete their programmes of study. Issues that were mentioned included:

- initial information and guidance
- time to choose courses during induction
- support in making the transition to college
- tutors facilitating change of course at an early stage
- tracking student progress including attendance and the achievement of a modular learning programme
- increased personal knowledge of students
- identification of 'at risk' students
- referral to appropriate sources of help
- speedy response to problems
- motivating students by recording achievement

These tutors also mentioned that the success of tutorial practice could largely depend on the qualities, behaviours and skills of the tutors concerned. This last issue is extremely important. It has become apparent from a variety of anecdotal and informal sources, from a number of published Inspection reports, and from the OFSTED/FEFC survey *16 to 19 Guidance*, that the quality of tutorial effectiveness varies widely not only between but also within colleges.

Quantitative data from college records was not readily available to support the views of tutors.

It is notoriously difficult to link changes in retention rates to individual changes to the curriculum or to student support systems. Indeed, the case study colleges were very cautious about doing so and preferred to implement multidimensional strategies in the belief that single interventions would not be effective. A second qualifying issue may well be associated with the validity of historic retention data. Some colleges outside of the sample have found that despite a number of interventions, retention rates appear to go down. On investigation, they concluded that real retention rates were improving, but that the improvements had been masked by having more accurate information about the extent of student drop-out.

Third, and perhaps most seriously, the project colleges were unable to assess the quality and consistency of their tutoring systems. Inconsistent achievement of standards or substantial variations in tutorial practice within the sample colleges would tend to undermine any attempt to judge the effectiveness of tutorials in each of the colleges.

There was, however, some qualitative data from student respondents which suggested that effective tutorial practice may be part of the solution. Some 350 students completed a questionnaire. The sample varied in size between colleges, with 87 students in the largest group and 14 in the smallest. The sample was

structured to include equal numbers of students from courses with high and low retention rates.

What seemed best to distinguish the views of students from high and low retention courses was that the former:

- tended to have more regular tutorials set within a better defined structure
- spent more time individually with tutors
- were more likely to rate tutorials as useful
- had a clear idea of the purpose of the tutorials
- believed that their tutors had a clear idea of the purpose and value of tutorials
- were able to be more precise in what they wanted from tutorials, notably feedback on progress, study skill support, careers education and help with progression

Students on courses with low retention rates, on the other hand, were more likely to ask for more tutorial time and more help with personal problems.

Students were given the opportunity to comment on things they did not like. The main issues which were identified were:

- 'time wasting' — tutorials with no clear purpose and which did not seem to contribute to the programme of study
- 'squabbling about attendance' and 'nagging', i.e. where tutorials were being used primarily to monitor attendance (particularly from those who had withdrawn)
- a focus on negative feedback about under-achievement to the exclusion of positive feedback
- action planning where this was seen as a boring, lengthy or apparently purpose-less administrative task

The views of the student sample provide some tentative support to the widely held belief that tutoring systems, properly designed and delivered, can help improve completion rates.

Retention strategies in North America

Partly because the issue has been a priority for longer, partly because of the volume of community college activity, and partly because of the availability of substantial discretionary funding to support action research, there have been a relatively large number of American evaluation studies.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the diversity of the British FE sector, amply illustrated by the case studies, should warn us against any naive attempt to generalise directly from the American to the British context, or to apply North American remedies to British problems. On the other hand, a recent article by P Beatty-Guenter (Retention strategies at community colleges, *Community College Journal of Research Practice* 18(2), 1994) provides some interesting points of comparison and contrast. In a crisp and concise piece, Beatty-Guenter reviews over 60 studies of retention strategies, most of which have involved monitoring and assessment of outcomes against measurable objectives.

Five main types of successful strategy are identified:

- sorting
- supporting
- connecting
- transforming students
- transforming the college

The first group of 'sorting' strategies is broadly similar to British strategies designed to work at pre-entry and threshold phases. They comprise a range of measures including marketing — here identified largely with promotional activity which provides honest and realistic information about course benefits and costs (study requirements, fees, materials, etc.). 'Sorting' extends to what are described as 'best fit' admissions processes, assessment on entry and placement on courses, all of which have their British equivalents in terms of specified entry requirements, adequate, rigorous and impartial advice, and guidance and diagnostic assessment. Sorting strategies also include 'academic alert' systems which we would identify as mechanisms to monitor student

attendance and progress. The sorting strategy which seems to be much less well developed in Britain is the practice of profiling 'at risk' students.

Being 'at risk' in North America means satisfying several demographic indicators rather than showing signs of academic or personal difficulty. Such indicators have yet to be convincingly demonstrated in the British context (see *Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence*, P Martinez, Mendip Paper MP084, FEDA, 1995), although Knowsley College is gathering data which may underpin such a system.

The second category of successful American retention strategies looks very familiar. 'Supporting' strategies comprise those interventions which we would categorise as learner support. They include measures to provide support in respect of:

- childcare
- financial assistance
- health and well-being programmes

They would also include policies to provide transport to and from college, and measures to ensure the personal safety and security of students.

Evaluation of 'connecting' strategies in North America provides some empirical support for the possible benefits of their British equivalents. 'Connecting' in this context is essentially concerned with developing and fostering relationships between students and college. Connecting strategies which have been widely adopted in Britain and America include 'orientation' (British equivalent: induction), the introduction of 'faculty advisers' or mentors (British equivalent: tutors rather than the more specialist guidance of counselling staff), and changes to classroom practice to include interactive and active approaches to learning, increased emphasis on differentiation, project work, and what Nasta describes as a move from pedagogy towards 'andragogy', treating students as adults (*How to design a vocational curriculum: a practical guide for schools and colleges*, T Nasta, 1994).

A North American emphasis on developing student leisure interests, outdoor pursuits, residentials, sports, arts, drama, visits and exchanges, student clubs and societies, has a British equivalent which may broadly be described as the enrichment curriculum. A recent FEFC survey found that individual enrichment sessions tend to be well planned, organised and delivered, but that the programmes of which they form part may lack a clear purpose and be undervalued by both students and teachers (*Enrichment of the curriculum*, FEFC, 1996). The same survey noted that enrichment programmes are currently being curtailed in many colleges because of funding pressures.

There are further parallels that can be drawn in relation to attendance monitoring and follow-up. Indeed, connecting strategies feature significantly in all of the college case studies.

The two American connecting strategies which seem to be less prevalent in Britain are the provision of part-time work and 'peer programmes'. The first is largely self-explanatory and refers to those community colleges which provide significant opportunities for paid part-time work for their students, partly as an employment policy and partly as a means of alleviating student poverty. This emphasis is in contrast to the British preference for (usually) unpaid work experience and work simulation. The second refers to efforts that are made in some community colleges to provide student mentors, often across year groups (Year 2 students mentoring first year students, or college students mentoring high-school students), or between peers.

Strategies to 'transform' students are mainly concerned with raising aspirations and levels of commitment. Specific strategies (provision of learning assistance, study skills, tutoring, remedial education and counselling about academic and career goals) seem quite close to developments in the British curriculum. If there is a difference, it would seem to lie in a different emphasis on outcomes. American efforts in this area seem largely to be evaluated against the ultimate goal of achieving demonstrable success in raising levels of achievement and Beatty-Guenter cites 16 studies of transforming strategies.

Finally, strategies to transform the college may seem rather ambitious to British eyes. Some of the community colleges which have been most successful at improving student completion rates are those which have embarked on radical and extensive change programmes, usually involving:

- policy changes
- curriculum (re)design
- action research programmes
- cultural change
- teacher development programmes
- steps to generalise and embed new learning across the college

These measures find direct parallels in the case studies. The retention projects usually started with a more limited focus. As issues were investigated and strategies formulated, in all cases, however, there was an acknowledgement of the need to transform the college. Indeed, further parallels can be detected in the burgeoning British literature on school improvement which draws similar conclusions about schools which have succeeded in making dramatic improvements in student outcomes (see for example *Success against the odds*, National Commission on Education, 1996).

8. Conclusions

Given the tentative and experimental nature of the student retention strategies reviewed here, conclusions need to be drawn with a degree of caution. However, it can be inferred with confidence that colleges are making a difference by developing retention strategies with demonstrably successful outcomes.

Having compared the case studies, five main generalisations can be made.

There was, in all four cases, a research stimulus which played a significant role both in mobilising energy, effort and enthusiasm and informing the creation of strategy. In Knowsley and the Isle of Wight, this took the form of research commissioned or undertaken in conjunction with external partners; in Walsall and Long Road the formulation of strategy was stimulated largely by the analysis of data already held by the college (withdrawal and student survey data in both cases; ALIS and course review data at Long Road; analyses of the profile of adult students at Walsall together with outputs from Student Focus meetings).

In view of our criticisms made elsewhere (*Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence*, P Martinez, Mendip Paper 084, FEDA, 1995), it is not surprising that data generated by the usual system for recording the reasons for student withdrawal (e.g *Student destinations: college procedures an practices*, FEFC, 1996b), seems to have played no or very little part as a stimulus to action.

Secondly, the case studies provide empirical support for the view that there is unlikely to be a panacea. Different colleges have different cultures, student and staff profiles, curriculum offers, etc. The North American research suggests quite strongly that every college will need to pay attention to 'sorting, supporting, connecting and transforming strategies'. The precise mix of objectives, strategies and interventions is likely, however, to be unique to each college.

Thirdly, the case studies also provide empirical support for many of the more common propositions derived from management of change theory. Ownership by and support from senior managers is important. Action in conditions of partial and incomplete information is preferable to an endless search for perfect information and, indeed, if undertaken as a more or less conscious experiment, will generate better information. All the strategies reviewed were driven by people who adopted what can be described as change agent roles, and their tasks were made easier where they were also members of the college senior management team or had good access to it.

The successful strategies all embody elements of college transformation. Starting with a number of different ways of formulating issues and with a number of more or less broadly defined strategies, all of the case study colleges have ended up addressing issues of cultural change, staff and student expectations and basic taken-for-granted assumptions about college mission and purpose. Indeed, in one college, all the managers and staff I met agreed on one thing at least: the culture of the college had changed. Closely associated with this is a general application of a 'hearts and minds' approach (emphasis on communication, high staff involvement, project teams and risk-taking). Colleges have stressed improvement and development rather than punishment and discipline, with a strong focus on the engagement of the professional interest and enthusiasm of teachers and business support staff. The one exception to this observation is the insistence, supported by sanctions, that registers would be accurate and kept up to date.

The last and perhaps most tentative conclusion is that student retention issues, probably associated with student achievement issues, may well form the cornerstone of a new literature of college improvement. In Paul Lalgee's words:

> *'Every aspect of college life can be enhanced by trying to improve retention.'*

Future work

From meeting with and talking to some 250 people from a variety of different college backgrounds, there seem to be four main directions for future action:

1 the development of more robust models for quality and information systems. These will assist colleges to make optimal use of the data which is largely in their possession already, in order to promote student retention

2 research across the FE sector to explore the general characteristics of both completion and drop-out with a focus on programme areas and/or particular student groups

3 more sophisticated use by individual colleges either of data which they already gather (for example through the statistical analyses of SPOC data), or of new survey data which can compare and contrast the experience and perceptions of current and withdrawn students

4 an extension of the work started here to disseminate and analyse demonstrably successful retention strategies

FEDA has recently started research projects in respect of the first, second and fourth issues outlined above, and can provide a variety of forms of support to individual colleges for the third.

FEDA has just completed two projects on:

- recording and responding to student absenteeism (including various cross-college strategies)
- electronic methods of recording student absenteeism

If you would like to be kept informed about these and other FEDA initiatives around student retention, and if you have not already done so, please complete the networking form opposite.

Student retention network

1. Personal details

Name: .....

College/centre: .....

Address: .....

Postcode: ..... Tel: .....

2. Issues

What specific issues are you currently addressing?

3. Actions

How are you addressing or proposing to address these issues?

1. Pre-entry, entry measures

2. Measures to improve programmes

3. Measures to improve learning support

4. Measures to improve learner support

5. Absence/exit procedures

6. Monitoring information

7. Other

4. Targets

What specific targets or timescales (if any) do you have?

Thank you for completing this networking form.

Please return it to:
Paul Martinez, Further Education Development Agency, FREEPOST (BS6745), Blagdon, Bristol BS18 6BR

As FEDA undertakes further activities, publishes research and reports and offers training and dissemination events, I will keep you informed.

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P Martinez (1995) **Student retention in further and adult education: the evidence** Mendip Paper 084, FEDA

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